

Sacred Chants and Vanishing Voices: An Ethnographic Study of *Zizi* (Shaman) Rituals and Ritualistic-language of the *Shertukpen* Tribe of India

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Abstract:

West Kameng District of Arunachal Pradesh, located in the north-eastern region of the Indian subcontinent is a home to six major indigenous tribes. The *Shertukpens* are one among the indigenous tribes that inhabit the southern part of the district. The *Shertukpens* exhibit an interesting blend of *Mahayana Buddhism* and indigenous belief system known as *Bon*. This indigenous belief system which predates *Buddhism* remains central to their socio-religious life and are characterized by ceremonies and rituals administered by specialized priests called *zizis*. The rituals and ceremonies involving trance, divination, healing, and protection from malevolent forces require the recitation of hymns using an esoteric and archaic ritualistic language that is incoherent to the general community. This chanting is believed to facilitate communication between the *zizi* and the deities inhabiting the mystical realms and guarding the *Shertukpen* country.

The *zizis* in *Shertukpen* tribe are categorized into *Chandzizi* and *Khikzizi* on the basis of their mode of ordainment. While the *Chandzizis* are considered divinely chosen through series of dreams and visions imparted by tutelary deities, the *Khikzizis* undergo a prolonged process of apprenticeship. Both are considered divinely chosen and after attaining certain level of expertise both are formally recognized, following which, both are believed to receive spiritual authority from the mythical mountain deity *Sungkhit*. Further, the *Khikzizis* are entrusted to performing major community rituals tied to the ritual calendar. Both categories of *zizis* play a crucial role at the community and household levels, administering rites for healing, protection, and collective well-being.

In the recent years, the number of practicing *zizis* has declined sharply. This decline is attributed to several factors including the pressures of modernization, stringent ritual obligations, non-remunerative nature of priesthood, and waning interest among the younger generation. The decline poses a serious threat to the existence of the archaic ritualistic language and the associated oral tradition, which constitute an important component of the *Shertukpens*' intangible cultural heritage and religious-identity. Employing ethnographic methods such as participant observation, and interviews with *zizis*, village elders, and traditional council members, the present study aims to contribute to the preservation of an endangered indigenous belief system and its ritual language. Documentation and interpretation of the significance of the rituals performed by the *Khikzizis* constitutes an important component of the study. The study also explored the initiatives undertaken by the community for promotion and preservation of *zizi*-culture. Measures involving textual transliteration of the chants/ritualistic language, audio-visual documentation of rituals, mechanisms to formally recognize these priests by the Government with proper honorarium, formal apprenticeship workshops and programmes are highly recommended on the basis of the findings of the present study.

Keywords: Shertukpen, Khikzizi, Chandzizi, ritualistic-language, socio-religious identity.

INTRODUCTION

Shertukpen, an indigenous tribe, numbering around three thousand five hundred people (Census) are settled in the southern part of *West Kameng District, Arunachal Pradesh* in north-eastern corner of *Indian sub-continent*. They comprise two consanguineous groups; *Shenjhis (Sher)*, who inhabit the *Shergaon* village and *Thonjis (Tukpen)* inhabiting *Rupa* and adjacent villages. They like to identify themselves as ‘*Mey*’ and speak ‘*Mey-Nyuk*’ which belongs to *Tibeto-Burmese* language family. Minor variations exist in this language even within the *Shertukpen* villages. However, notable differences occur in this language between the *Shenjhis* and *Thonjis* in terms of tone and accent. To the north-east of their present land, a similar language is spoken amongst another distinct tribe, the *Shartang*, with whom common ancestral lineage is claimed (Megejee).

Shertukpens follow *Mahayana-Buddhism* and also practice indigenous beliefs called ‘*Bon*’. In fact, the practice of indigenous belief systems amongst them prevailed even before they turned into *Buddhists* (Sarkar). The priests in *Buddhism* are the monks or *Lamas* whereas, the priests or shamans called *zizis* are the main custodian of their *Bon* religion. The *Buddhist Lamas* perform rituals by chanting the religious texts written in *Bhoti* (Tibetan) script. On the other hand, the *zizis* are required to perform the rituals by chanting in a dialect incoherent to the common men. The chanting is not recorded in any scripted form and hence, the *zizis* learn them by rote. These incantations are believed to be the language of communication between the *zizis* and nature-deities (Y. D. Thongchi).

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

In *Shertukpen* society, the main practitioners of *Bon* religion i.e. the *zizis* are broadly categorized into two types on the basis of their ordainment; the *Chandzizi* and *Khikzizi*. The *Chandzizis* are the chosen ones of their respective tutelary deities called the *armus*. They are taught the nuances of a *zizi* in a series of dreams and visions by the *armus*, who are believed to be beautiful nymphs. *Zizis* claim that they are married to these *armus* in their preternatural world. Any person who possesses shamanistic instincts and behavioural traits of a *zizi* can be chosen by the deity for the role irrespective of the clan, status, sex and age. More often, any person who has had the family history of being a *zizi* is likely to be chosen. On the other hand, *Khikzizis* are inducted into priesthood after undergoing years of apprenticeship under a master and formal recognition by the traditional council called *Blu* (Megeji et.al). However, the role of *Khikzizis* is entrusted upon two particular clans *Dingla* and *Megeji* since time immemorial. Upon gaining some insights into the nuances of a *Khikzizi*, the person is said to be accepted as his heir by the most powerful mythical mountain-deity, *Sungkhith*. The *Khikzizi* is allocated with *armus* for guidance and incorporeal warriors called *makfeyns* (warrior-deities) for protection by the *Sungkhith*.

It is interesting to note that the incantations of the *zizi* involve a dialect beyond the comprehension of common people. The *zizis* during trance rituals use this archaic language to communicate with the deities and beings of mystical realms. The divinely messages are disseminated through an elderly person (*Changmepo*) who is specialized in assisting *zizis* during trance rituals. The *zizi* on regaining consciousness after completion of the ritual is unable to recount the incantations and prophecies. In addition to following *Buddhism*, the *Shertukpens* still continue to invoke and appease the nature-gods through *zizis*. Thus, *zizis* are essential to the sustenance of the unique socio-religious values with which the *Shertukpens* are identified with.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

In the light of above-mentioned facts, the present study has been carried out with an aim to:

1. Document and interpret the significance of the rituals performed by the *Khikzizis*.
2. Explore the initiatives undertaken by the community for promotion and preservation of *zizi*-culture.
3. Suggest measures for preservation of endangered ritualistic language of the *zizis*.

METHODOLOGY

A comprehensive and multi-faceted methodology has been adopted to effectively preserve and understand the archaic dialect of the *Shertukpen zizis* and its profound role in their socio-religious identity. The researchers have extensively collected oral materials used by the *zizis* during their rituals through participant observation method. Audio and video recording of the ritualistic performances were done. In depth interviews with the *zizis* and village and council members were conducted to explore the challenges the *zizis* face in preserving their tradition and their perspectives on the declining number of *zizis*. Interview with the *zizis* and community leaders offered the perspectives on their role in preserving the archaic dialect and *Bon* belief system.

FINDINGS: ROLE OF THE ZIZIS

The incoherent language used by the *zizis* is in the form of chants during the performance of various rites. Following is an account of rites performed by the *zizis*:

Ritualistic Practices

Numerous rites are to be administered and performed by both the categories of *zizis*. Services of both *Chandzizi* and *Khikzizi* are sought at household level to perform rites. In addition to performing rites at household level, the *Khikzizis* are required to perform rites annually under the supervision of the *Blu* (Traditional Council) to ensure well-being of the community.

Household Level Rites

PhudohSonba: *PhudohSonba* is performed before the twentieth day of the local month to offer gratitude to the mountain-deities that protect the household members, crops and livestock. This is mandatory ritual in order to perform other important rites.

Yaam Hibah: This rite is performed to appease the spirits that inflict diseases to any household member. Literally, *Yaam* refers to the house and *Hibah* means to observe. Post performance of this ritual, the house is quarantined and outsiders are prohibited to enter the house for the next two days. The ailing person should strictly avoid going outside the house while the family members cannot go far. A cross made of wood called *mamfla* is erected at the main entrance to symbolize that the ritual has been carried out. It is also believed that *mamfla* acts as repellent to the malicious elements.

SungkhitsakpoChhopah: This rite is performed to apprise, seek consent and blessings from the main patron deity, the *Sungkhit*, for performing *Yaam Hibah* ritual.

Yung Lubah: *Shertukpens* are of belief that the soul of a person goes out of his body for a brief moment when he gets frightened or shocked. Such souls are sometimes held captive by the evil spirits as a result of which the person becomes weak and sick for a prolonged period. So, in order to recover the lost soul, this rite is performed.

Sog Shing Sonbah: *Sog Shing Sonbah* is conducted to enhance the life span of an ailing person or to invigorate the life of a person who had been affected by prolonged illness. It is often preceded by *yunglubah* rite.

YaamChhagMohpah: *YaamChhagMohpah* is a rite performed to expel the malevolent entities like the *brangbrokshing* that take refuge in the house and cause troubles by inflicting diseases, quarrels and restlessness.

Hah Nyatpah: It is a kind of exorcism performed to evict the wandering soul of a dead person and lead it to netherworld. The *Zizi*, during this rite, allows the dead soul to transmigrate to his body and confess

the sorrows and grievances of the dead person. At the end of the rite, the dead soul is offered with the edibles and are directed to leave the living-world.

Lui SakpaChhopa: *Lui SakpaChhopa* rite is carried out to propitiate the benevolent spirits called *lui* whose sacredness has been dishonored by rendering their place dirty due to the activities of the people.

Khryuichhyeuh: The *Zizis* treat the people suffering from epilepsy (*xo nyoba*) or other neurological disorders (*luineyzohney*) using sanctified water therapy.



Images: *Zizi* pouring *Khryuichhyeuh* (sanctified water)

LograngMohpah: *LograngMohpah* is a rite performed for the well-being of the new born baby.

Jie-e Sur Ribah: This rite is performed to ward off the soul of a dead person that has transmigrated into a person's body.

Mik Khehpah and *Luing Khehpah*: These rites are performed in order to cure people of excruciating pain in the muscles and joints which are believed to be perpetrated by the children of the deities during their play.

ThambuLanbah: *ThambuLanbah* is a kind of divination to determine the type of disease, cause of disease, whereabouts of lost articles or person by throwing dice or examining the yolk of boiled eggs.

Community Level Rites

DingphonSonba: This annual ceremony is performed for the peace and prosperity of the entire *Shertukpen* community by the *Khikzizis* at various sacred stones in *Rupa* village.

PhhotTyoenbah: This annual rite is performed at a designated place called '*Lohblang*' in *Rupa* village by the *Khikzizis* in order to offer undefiled maize crop to all the guardian deities. *Lhoblant* literally means the abode (*blang*) of deities (*Loh*). The *Shertukpens* are allowed to harvest their maize-crops only after this rite has been performed.



Image: Oblatory-items during *PhhotTyoenbah*

PhiyawTyoenbah: It is the annual rite administered by the *Khikzizis* to offer first harvest of millets to the guardian deities at *Lohblang*.

Thongdok Rek Phuikma: It is an annual ceremony conducted under the supervision of *Khikzizis* that involves ploughing and sowing of millets in designated agricultural field by one of the members of

Thongdok clan for successful agricultural season. It is only after this ceremony that the *Shertukpens* start cultivating their fields.

Khiksaba: *Khiksaba* is a weeklong rite cum festival of the *Shertukpens* which is performed to worship and propitiate the mountain deities. The *Khikzizis* along with other participants are involved in carrying out elaborate rituals at various scared places during this festival.



Image 1: *Zizis plaiting nine sacred threads into one during a Khiksaba ritual.*
Image 2: *Zizi offering oblation to the guardian-deities during Khiksaba ritual.*

Major Concerns

The role of the *zizis* in the present-day context has however undergone some limitations. Although the role of *zizis* remains persistent at the community level, however their role in the household level seems to have declined owing to the availability and accessibility of modern medical facilities in nearby regions. Another major concern is the dwindling numbers of *zizis* in *Shertukpen* villages. This decline is primarily attributed to the reluctance among the younger generation to embrace the challenging role of a *zizi*. The implications of this trend are profound, as it poses a serious threat to the continuity of the archaic dialect and, by extension, the entire *Bon* belief system. Currently, the number of *zizis* has declined to a great extent since the younger generation is not ready to take up the role of their predecessors. Amongst many reasons, the strict food habit a *zizi* has to follow, dissuades the people from turning into *zizis*. There are people who strongly defy and resist the signs of becoming a *zizi* by consuming prohibited food-items such as garlic, onion and pork. During the course of the study, some *zizis* responded that they face myriads of challenges which further discourage individuals from taking up this sacred role. These challenges include strict dietary restrictions that go against modern culinary practices and the necessity to forgo educational and career opportunities. Though, formal recognition through Government initiatives by paying honorarium has been started but the aid does not suffice their needs. The sacrifices demanded by the role of a *zizi* deter potential successors. In the modern times, the profession of a *zizi* is non-remunerative except getting a meager quantity of ration or lump sum amount of money.

The Council heads and village elders, during the interviews, raised their concern about the threat to the *Bon* Belief System. Modernization is identified as a significant contributing factor to the gradual erosion of the *Bon* belief system within the *Shertukpen* tribe. The dwindling number of *zizis* and the oral nature of the tradition make it exceptionally vulnerable to this impact. The *Bon* belief system, deeply intertwined with the archaic language, faces an uncertain future. Hence, they are of the opinion that a systematic approach must be undertaken for the continuity and preservation of the traditional belief system. The concerned members of the community realize the critical importance of documenting the intangible cultural heritage of the *Shertukpen* tribe. This documentation extends beyond language and

rituals; it encompasses the very essence of their socio-religious identity. Preserving this heritage is not merely an academic endeavor but a cultural imperative to ensure that future generations can understand, appreciate, and carry forward the rich legacy of their ancestors.

SUGGESTIVE MEASURES

Having unearthed these critical findings, the next logical step is to explore preservation efforts and future directions for safeguarding the cultural heritage of the *Shertukpen* tribe:

1. **Archival Efforts:** The preservation of the archaic dialect hinges on meticulous archival efforts. Oral materials collected during the research, including incantations and chants should be cataloged and stored in a secure archival repository. These documents are not only linguistic artifacts but also cultural treasures that must be protected for posterity. For this, a field work was conducted for observation and recording of the events during the *Khiksaba* festival. The ritualistic chanting were recorded and documented in the written form by using *Devanagri* script as the Roman script was not sufficient to transcribe some of the sounds.
2. **Digital Preservation:** In an age of digital technology, the digitization of recorded materials, including audio and video recordings of *zizi* rituals, becomes imperative. These digital archives can serve as accessible repositories for future research and educational purposes.
3. **Community Education:** Empowering the *Shertukpen* community with knowledge about the significance of their cultural heritage is paramount. Educational initiatives, workshops, and awareness programs can help instill pride in their traditions, encouraging younger generations to take an interest in preserving the *Bon* belief system and the archaic dialect.
4. **Collaborative Documentation:** Collaboration with linguists and cultural preservation experts is essential. Establishing partnerships with academic institutions and cultural organizations can provide the *Shertukpen* community with access to resources and expertise necessary for comprehensive documentation and preservation.
5. **Oral History Projects:** The elder members of the *Shertukpen* community possess invaluable oral history. Initiatives to capture their narratives, anecdotes, and memories related to the archaic dialect and *zizi* practices can contribute significantly to cultural preservation efforts.
6. **Supporting *Zizis*:** Recognizing the challenges faced by *zizis*, efforts should be made to provide them with support and recognition. This may include financial assistance, educational opportunities, and measures to alleviate the dietary restrictions that deter potential successors.
7. **Cultural Revival:** Promoting cultural revival through festivals, performances, and community gatherings can help rejuvenate interest in the *Bon* belief system and the archaic dialect. Celebrating and showcasing these traditions can attract both community members and external audiences.
8. **Advocacy and Policy:** Advocacy at regional and national levels is necessary to highlight the cultural significance of the *Shertukpen* heritage. Advocates can work to influence policy decisions that support the preservation of indigenous cultures and languages.

CONCLUSION

This comprehensive study serves as an in-depth exploration of the *Shertukpen Zizis'* role in preserving their archaic dialect and the *Bon* belief system. It reveals not only the profound significance of language in their rituals but also the urgent need to address the challenges threatening their cultural heritage. The findings emphasize the necessity of proactive measures and community involvement to safeguard these unique traditions for generations to come. With the advent of modernization, the *Bon* as a belief system is dying a slow death which is a serious concern for the entire *Shertukpen* tribe. Since the tradition is mostly oral in nature, it makes it all the more difficult to preserve the cultural and ritualistic practices. All these reasons make it imperative to carry out proper research and document the oral ritualistic tradition along with its archaic language so that the indigenous faith is not lost.

As we explore the *Shertukpen* narrative, we encounter a pressing reality—the vulnerability of their ritualistic archaic language poses a direct threat to the very essence of their indigenous identity. The echo of their chants and the resonance of their linguistic expressions are at risk of fading into silence posing a tangible threat, echoing a global concern shared by indigenous communities worldwide. Scholars such as *Megejee* and *Sarkar* provide a contextual backdrop, illuminating the challenges faced by tribes like *Shertukpen*. Yet, amid the shadows of potential linguistic loss, there emerges a narrative of resilience and hope as the *Shertukpen* embark on strategies to revitalize and safeguard their unique linguistic legacy.

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